

HOUSE JOINT RESOLUTION 1306

By Hardaway

A RESOLUTION to honor and recognize Reverend Ezekiel Bell.

WHEREAS, the State of Tennessee has been exceptionally fortunate during its history to benefit from the outstanding leadership provided by those committed Ministers of the Gospel who lead churches across this State and who, with their congregations, provide the bedrock strength that defines an orderly and just society; and

WHEREAS, one such dedicated pastor and church leader is Reverend Ezekiel Bell of the Memphis community, who sets a shining example for church leaders across the State by his acceptance of all, regardless of sex, class, or race; and

WHEREAS, Reverend Bell began his courageous civil rights activism in 1959, when he moved to Huntsville, Alabama, intent on fulfilling a promise he had made as a student at the University of Chicago Seminary School; and

WHEREAS, Reverend Bell, along with two of his classmates, made a pact that they would change the world in the next five years; Reverend Bell fulfilled his promise, as he is counted among the local leaders and civil rights activists who changed conditions for blacks in Huntsville, integrating the city's parks, lunch counters, and public schools; and

WHEREAS, during the pinnacle of this movement, the activists invited Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., to speak at Oakwood College, and on March 19, 1962, Reverend King gave his renowned "I Have a Dream" speech at the Oakwood Gym, almost a year-and-a-half before he famously presented the speech at the March on Washington; and

WHEREAS, as Chairman of Huntsville's first civil rights organization, the Community Service Committee, Reverend Bell was responsible for arranging Martin Luther King, Jr.'s historic visit and opened up his home to Reverend King, where he stayed for the duration of his visit; Reverend Bell's home was also the site of several civil rights strategy sessions; and

WHEREAS, more than forty years later, Reverend Bell is still counted as one of the principal civil rights leaders in Huntsville and is credited with almost single-handedly mobilizing the community; he also helped found the Fellowship Presbyterian Church, where he served as the minister; and

WHEREAS, in 1966, Reverend Bell became the pastor of Parkway Gardens Presbyterian Church and moved to Memphis, where he had graduated from Douglas High School before attending Tennessee State University in Nashville and enrolling in the University of Chicago Seminary School on a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation; and

WHEREAS, he continued his tireless pursuit of equal rights and opportunities for all in Memphis, where he became actively involved in the 1968 sanitation workers' strike; and

WHEREAS, Reverend Bell showcased his ardent support and championing of fairness and equality in the workplace by becoming the first African-American minister to march with the sanitation workers; during this tumultuous time, he demonstrated great bravery and dignity, as he practiced what he preached from the pulpit and was arrested more times than he can count; and

WHEREAS, he further served his community with great distinction as President of the Memphis Chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People; and

WHEREAS, in 2007, Reverend Bell contributed his expertise as a member of a panel discussion on racial and social injustice at the first Southern Faith, Labor, and Community Alliance Conference; and

WHEREAS, Reverend Bell spoke of his experiences during the 1968 Sanitation Workers' Strike, stating, "I was glad to be with men who were standing for the right thing. If you are your brother's keeper, then you ought to be there. I felt that way."; and

WHEREAS, his many accomplishments aside, Reverend Bell is most grateful for the love and support of his wife, Eltie, and their two sons; and

WHEREAS, Reverend Bell is truly a catalyst for positive change who is most assuredly deserving of commendation for his superb contributions and heroic efforts in obtaining equal rights for all; and

WHEREAS, highly regarded as a professional and as a friend, Reverend Ezekiel Bell is a shining example of a person wholly committed to the highest ideals of public service, and he should be specially recognized; now, therefore,

BE IT RESOLVED BY THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES OF THE ONE HUNDRED FIFTH GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE STATE OF TENNESSEE, THE SENATE CONCURRING, that we honor and salute Reverend Ezekiel Bell for his enduring efforts to resist social injustice and commend him for his lifetime of extraordinary service to his community, state, and nation.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that an appropriate copy of this resolution be prepared for presentation with this final clause omitted from such copy.